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Laura Dern's Vomit, or, Kant and Derrida in Oz

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And worse I may be yet: The worst is not
So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'
- *King Lear* (4.1.27-28)

In a 1929 letter to Einstein, Freud explained a certain resistance or hostility towards psychoanalysis in these terms: 'From the inside, we want only to be left in peace. So if someone tries to turn our awareness inward, [...] then our whole organization resists - just as, for example, the oesophagus and the urethra resist any attempt to reverse their normal direction of passage' (quoted in Grubrich-Simitis 1995, 117). A disposition of the human towards the outside world maps onto the 'normal direction of passage' in gut systems; a turn towards the unconscious, however - the entirety of an apparatus implied in that 'awareness inward' - is resisted in full by a physical organization hell-bent on a proper teleology of digestion. It is fitting that Freud turns to the figure of esophageal revolt to defend the inward turn of psychoanalytic reflection - both historically, as vomit was of great importance in his and Breuer's early work on the symptoms of hysteria, and evocatively, as analytic practice was accused of encouraging a vomitous production of questionably relevant speech with the famous injunction that the patient must tell all. Vomit, as a privileged confession of the materiality of the body becomes, in Freud's comparison, a privileged confession of the non-materiality of the body in that inward turn. (Freud's metaphor also strikingly suggests that it is the work of the analyst to finger the patient's throat in a forced bulimia.) At the same time, however, the gesture that Freud invokes and affiliates with analytic praxis is an inward turn lacking interiority: an orientation towards the unconscious as the site of alterity in the subject. Vomit's gagging richness relies on precisely this conceptual flexibility: the expulsion of the contents of the stomach through the mouth links gut and face, bowl and rim, deep bodily space with orifices that open to

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

the outside, and it therefore hovers between structures of interiority as they are riddled through by unknowable, unspeakable, unfathomable exteriorities.

Vomit tempts; it solicits. If the first lure of vomit is this drive to construct it as a metaphor for any of those inward processes or exterior productions (to read, in other words, wet liquid rushes as anything *other* than vomit), the second is a rabid desire to link it to *cause*, to fix and determine why precisely one's lower esophageal sphincter has relaxed and abdominal musculature has contracted - *Because you are dying or because you are in pain. Because you are pregnant; because you are a child (down my father's back)*. My argument in this essay will be that vomit must neither be treated as a metaphor that rushes past its foul materiality nor reduced to narratives of provocation that bind it to the always-comforting logic of ordered causality. Rather, two films by David Lynch suggest how vomit in film can function as a structure that puts formal material into play and, further, that produces a relationship between ethics, violence, and lingering smell. Vomit is risky stuff: the danger for criticism is that we flow too fast past its formal operators, what it specifically does to a visual text.

That vomit puts in play formal questions - and that the gut and alimentary canal might be subsumed to formal elements - is suggested in work dating back to the beginning of Lynch's career. His 1967 mixed-media piece of screen and sculpture sometimes titled *Six Figures Getting Sick* or *Six Men Getting Sick* (a symptomatic confusion) is indebted to Francis Bacon's onto-aesthetic project of rending figuration and representation to realign Figures with rhythm, color and what Deleuze calls the 'violence of sensation' ([1981] 2002). This early piece is comprised of open-mouthed faces in ambiguous states of frozen expulsion - at once, vomit and the scream or wail. The piece, often figured as Lynch's Ur-text (if not this, then the 1977 *Eraserhead*), consists of a screen sculpted into dimension; in a taking-literally of Deleuze's notion of Baconian 'forces that model flesh or shake it,' the figures in relief were modeled on Lynch's own body as an indexical cast ([1981] 2002, xxix). On the left side of the work are three sculpted heads: the most classical bust looks down, head tilted and resting in hand; the middle one parts its mouth as though in the beginnings of speech or a nascent Laocoön; and the final figure is an open-mouthed scream of a being: Edvard Munch on the Odessa Steps. A bifurcated half of another figure is painted as a flat image on the right side of the screen, while projected and increasingly abstracted head-things fill out the grouping over the course of the one-minute loop, set all the while to the piercing wails of a siren's sonic catastrophe.

Moving from left to right in the film version of the installation, as though laying out a text in print, and following the cine-archelogy of the head leader's descent, the three sculpted heads first appear, followed by three

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

projected sketches of figures. Under the numerical countdown the word 'Look' flashes, the imperative displacing deixis from the wagging digital to the directed ocular. Though less forcibly deformed than those one finds in Bacon's paintings, the heads are primarily fleshy arcs with hollowed-out holes above squared supportive ledges of bone and weight. Two of the projected heads on the right bleed into each other through the mediation of a gut-like pouch with tubes and hollows, a schematic for a duodenal ethics of intersubjectivity through digestive flow. Each figure is eventually elongated by a slender tube leading to a paunchy round; in its curved frame appears a graphic spiral, sign of affective turbulence. The graphic and the gastric continually swap places in a perversion of the famous Godardian law of representation: It's not chyme; it's red. The piece is organized around the formal labors of the enteric nervous system: esophageal flinches and undulations of the viscera provide the work's halting yet churning rhythms, and the visual language derives from lengths of alimentary interconnectedness, bowls and bowels, intestinal fluidity, and abdominal rebellion. Peristaltic undulations effect both the animation of the body and the animation of the sculpted screen.[1] The inhalations of many swallowings and the exhalations of many heavings culminate in a gastric eschatology in which the six figures vomit copious lines of dripping paint. The gagging pour floods white streaks against a now violet background, the overflow composed of the sum of all colors of light and simultaneously a perceived absence of color, corporeal interiority's red taken to its final logic of flat visual annihilation, a new kind of blankness.

If the white rush is the cannibalism of all colors, a totality of representational tonality, then its structural parallel is the additive excess of media cannibalized in the piece, exemplified by the ontological paradox of a 'sculpted screen,' but also signaled in the leader and horizontal lines of dots evoking celluloidal sprockets; the photographic x-ray of a torso; the chaotic intermix of painting, relief, image, sound; stasis, movement, space, surface. This *Gesamtkunstwerk* binges on representational intake, and its additive totality regurgitates that glut. The piece's spasmodic form is sick - a sick structure, not content; sick in and as its durational gesture. Emesis is not a subject of the work, not an iconographic thisness to be located or critically pointed to, but the animating motion of the turbulent form. Nevertheless, readings have persisted in figuring the *emetic* as a *thematic*, positing that the project initiated 'Lynch's interest in vomiting, which will be graphically and frequently represented in his paintings as well as in his full-length films' (Kaleta 1993, 7); in another version of this claim: 'sickness (or disease) and

[1] Equally, chyme's mix of the liquid and solid, the constitutively partially-digested, is a meta-structure for the mix of media and the confusion of stasis and movement (and animation and sculpture) in the piece.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

fire are two themes to which Lynch would return continually' (Hughes 2001, 6). Martha Nochimson takes this critical urge to its logical conclusion, figuring vomiting in the one-minute loop as a narrative act that takes place, and as a super-metaphor operative in Lynch's corpus as a whole.[2]

On the question of what takes place in the piece, there is disconcerting critical agreement on some version of the following account: 'Bright red stomachs dropped down from the chins of the faces. Eventually, all the stomachs appeared to explode into flames. Then all six men seemed to vomit violently' (Wilson 2007, 1). Even when criticism falls short of putting the vomit to work for narrative, as in Nochimson, there is a narrative arc imputed to the temporal ordering and culminating crisis of the piece: There are men; vomiting is something they do. However, a Figure is not a body. Writing the vomit or the vomiting into the piece as a narrative occurrence or thematic trope involves critics in the ignominious task of fleshing out the Figures, imputing to them a corporeal density, adding in exits and entries that must be prodded and poked to ascertain their material certainty. Sanitized in the literature is the messier violence of the spill of paint, the excavation of formal material from the materiality of the form. For the vomitus of a Figure is always and only paint. The six Figures are sick on form. Or, rather, there is no such 'are sick' - they are getting sick, in-process and in movement, animated as sick and animatedly sick. Animation as a technical gesture produces a formal nausea, whose roots in *naus* (ship) suggest the sickness of and from movement, here a sickness on and through the movements of mediated technological representation. In other words, and with more ferocity than the clenchings of any intestine: in Lynch's work, the Figures do not vomit; the vomit Figures.

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[2] For Nochimson, Lynch's 'love of narrative' is first evident in *Six Figures*: '[H]e makes the process of vomiting a Lynchian paradigm of the narrative structure. Vomiting is a brilliant image of the unstoppable narrative compulsion, proceeding relentlessly from the beginning, through the middle, to an end. At the same time, it is a completely involuntary process' (Nochimson 1997, 149-150). In a telling error, Nochimson describes the piece as depicting only five men, postulating that perhaps 'the "sixth man" is the spectator, and the title is a humorous comment on viewer engagement and identification' (Nochimson 1997, 150). Of course, this is incorrect: there are six Figures per the title in the piece and the spectator does not figure as an additive supplement to the count. On the one hand, Lynch's early work was unavailable for a long time, and many critical accounts relied on second- or third-hand reports of the 1967 installation, so Nochimson's mistake is neither surprising nor problematic within this context. On the other hand, the mistake reveals a broader critical bias, for Nochimson's insistence on reading Lynch's work as structured by an obsession with linear narrative compels her to place within *Six Figures* a corporeal subject in the figure of an engaged spectator. This slip attempts to turn the Figures into men, to reintroduce not only a body, but a subject to the labors of the formal freneticism.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

And it figures (and Figures) as a formal exteriority. Despite calls to return both vomit and Figure to a language of narrative, interiority, subjectivity, and recuperable meaning, the choking halting turbulence of *Six Figures Getting Sick* involves the wrenching failure of an impossible separation from the substrate of painterly material. It is important that this exteriorization of form figures through vomit, for esophageal passage - despite often being invoked as the trope *par excellence* of interiority expelled - as in the letter by Freud with which I began - is in fact a running-through of the inside by the outside. Like Foucault's description of the madman's privileged enclosure of the outside, 'kept at the point of passage' in his sea voyage, 'put in the interior of the exterior,' vomit is an experience of the force of the outside from within the body excerpted around esophageal tubing ([1961] 1965, 11). In *Six Figures Getting Sick*, against the telos of proper digestion, ending in defecation and a voiding of material through the coursing hollow at the center of the body, the face returns as the site of entry and exit - the mouth the only anus within the schematic - circling back intake in a citational recall as though performing the collapse of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls 'all the body's introductory *topoi*' - including 'breaching bodies, accesses, excesses, orifices, pores and portals of all skins, scars, navels, blazon, pieces, and fields, body by body, place by place, entry by entry by exit' - into one singular site of swallowing/spewing activity (Nancy [2006] 2008, 55). Despite the nod towards a humanism organized around faciality as the site of subjectivity, the body is ultimately parsed, pieced and dissected in this work, the human form reduced to tubal span. This length is not an interior enclosed within the confines of the subject, but a running through of the outside that supplants the self, a hollowing out at the core of the corpus. As Michael Gershon figures this excavation:

> The space enclosed within the wall of the bowel, its *lumen*, is part of the outside world. The open tube that begins at the mouth ends at the anus. Paradoxical as it may seem, the gut is a tunnel that permits the exterior to run right through us. Whatever is in the lumen of the gut is thus actually outside our bodies. (1998, 84)

Although vomit is retrofitted to a hermeneutics of interiority and depths (of substance or signification) in criticism that thematizes, metaphorizes or corporealizes its gesture in relation to an imaginary embodied figure with bowel and shape, vomiting should be regarded rather as bringing to the surface the exteriority of form that does not represent the Figures but that is constituted by them. *Six Figures Getting Sick* is, then, neither about men sickened, nor a presentation of vomit as a trope, theme, or narrative - it is the sickness of and on form.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

If this heaving visual language constitutes one possibility for a *formal* (and neither spectatorial nor metaphorical) disgust, Lynch's vomit of 1967 retains one central problem: a stubborn link to the subject, a bind, that is, to *vomiting*. My argument requires the strict separation of vomiting from vomit; in fact, the theoretical framework to which this article is indebted insists on the distinction. In 'Economimesis,' his analysis of the role of disgust in Kant's aesthetic philosophy, Derrida writes:

> It is indeed vomit that interests us rather than the act or process of vomiting, which are less disgusting than vomit in so far as they imply an activity, some initiative whereby the subject can at least sill mimic mastery or dream it in auto-affection, believing that he *makes himself vomit*. (Derrida [1975] 1981, 21)

It is vomit itself in its material being-there that figures not as *a* sign of disgust but as the irreducible undigested aspect of disgust that interests both Derrida and me; any attempt to reduce vomit to vomiting, to attach it to a fantasmatically volitional subject, then, is to attempt a translation of radical expulsion into temporary exteriorization. Similarly, Lynch's triumph over attempts to put vomit to work as something other than vomit is to lose the subject altogether in his 1990 *Wild at Heart*. Instead of Figures getting sick, sick, in the later film, is all there is.

'Economimesis' figures vomit as central to transcendental aesthetics, continuing a long tradition in philosophy that privileges vomit for theorizing disgust, and privileges disgust for theorizing (as its negative) the field of aesthetics. As though rising out of the sticky muck of the aesthetic's pleasures itself, in the mid-eighteenth-century debates that ultimately constituted the separate field of philosophy called aesthetics, *Ekel* [disgust, loathing] is first linked to an overindulgence on the aesthetic, an excessive sweetness that past a certain point becomes nauseating. The risk of overdose on the beautiful, a surfeit experience of pleasure, can thus lead to the sensation of unpleasure, a super-satiation and exhaustion of the senses in what ultimately refuses distance or contemplation - therefore, corresponding rules were developed for holding at bay the aesthetic (and gastronomic, and erotic) lure of gorging until one chokes. The strongest formulation of disgust's law of exclusion appears in Kant's third *Critique* in a discussion of the mimetic and the beautiful:

> The furies, diseases, devastations of war [. . .] can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting; only one kind of ugliness cannot be represented in a way adequate to nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction, hence beauty in art, namely, that which arouses loathing [*Ekel*]. For since in this strange sensation, resting on sheer imagination, the object is represented as if it

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

> were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting, the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation itself from the nature of the object itself, and it then becomes impossible for the former to be taken as beautiful. (Kant [1790] 2000, 190)

Ekel is the particular form of ugliness that functions as the limit for the possibilities of the aesthetic. For Kant, as for much aesthetic theory of the time, disgust figures as an unintegratable aspect of the aesthetic that the aesthetic cannot speak.

Or, digest - as goes Derrida's formulation in 'Economimesis.' Here, Derrida's deconstructive laser is focused on several terms in Kant's logic, in particular the seeming opposition between pleasure and enjoyment, and the titular relation between *mimesis* and *oikonomia*, art and salary. It is to the role of disgust in Kant's aesthetic, but also logocentric, philosophy that Derrida eventually turns - and 'turn' (*strephein*) is appropriate here, as disgust is framed as a catastrophe for the philosophy of the beautiful. The mouth as a key but ambiguous term in Kantian philosophy becomes the central site for a struggle over the opposing terms in Derrida's reading; as Derrida writes of Kant's oral examples and metaphors, there is 'a certain allergy in the mouth, between pure taste and actual tasting [*dégustation*]' ([1975] 1981, 16). Disgust poses the problem of relating the two forms of taste (aesthetic) and taste (tasting) to each other, a relation that will be figured as an irreducible opposition. As the question of orality comes to the fore, Derrida insists on the double sense in which mouth is taken (and given) in Kant: this mouth no longer 'merely occupies one place among others. It can no longer be situated *in* a typology of the body but seeks to organize the sites and to localize all the organs' ([1975] 1981, 16). Place of consumption (sensual: taste) and production (textual: *logos*), the mouth becomes a fold. Derrida finally distinguishes in Kant between 'two means of entering and two means of leaving the mouth, where one would be expressive and emissive (of the poem in the best case), the other vomitive or emetic' ([1975] 1981, 16).

The 'certain mouth' of Kantian interiorization:

> [A]ssimilates everything to itself by idealizing it within interiority, masters everything by mourning its passing, refusing to touch it, to digest it naturally, but digests it ideally, [. . .] produces disinterestedness in the possibility of pronouncing judgments [. . .] governs a space of analogy into which it does not let itself be drawn. (Derrida [1975] 1981, 20)

Ekel functions as the 'border which traces its limit and the frame of its *parergon*,' in other words, that which is 'excluded from it and what, proceeding from this exclusion, gives it form, limit, and contour' (Derrida

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

[1975] 1981, 21). Disgust's productive exclusion from fields of good taste defines and gives shape to the field of the aesthetic itself. The prohibiting gesture that Derrida locates is not one that is reducible to any opposition to ingestion, for it is not a relation that is in play, but another figuration altogether of the negative, the excluded, the limit. Kant's logo-phonocentrism excludes 'what does not allow itself to be digested, or represented, or stated [. . .]. It is an irreducible heterogeneity which cannot be eaten either sensibly or ideally and which - this is the tautology - by never letting itself be swallowed must therefore *cause itself to be vomited*' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 21). The centrality of vomit to transcendental aesthetics is not due only to its 'specific parergonal overflow' for Derrida, then - that it neatly (if also wetly) figures for all that is excluded, rejected, emitted, expelled - he goes much further to call vomit a scheme that structures the very *form* of exclusion in Kantian thought.[3]

Two things are seemingly undigestable for the transcendental aesthetic - the shattering, negative pleasures of the sublime and the figuration of the ugly in the Fine Arts. But, in fact, neither stands outside Kant's system. 'Although repulsive on one of its faces,' Derrida writes, 'the sublime is not the absolute other of the beautiful. It still provokes a certain pleasure' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 22). The negativity of the sublime - and that of the ugly, evil, or horrible - is recuperable. The non-recuperable excluded is a singular unassimilable thing, and it therefore forms 'the transcendental of the transcendental, the non-transcendentalisable, the non-idealisable, and that is the *disgusting*' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 22). As the hole of absolute otherness in aesthetics, disgust poses a problem for Kant's theory of representation; 'vomit is represented in advance as forcing pleasure, and that is why it disgusts' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 22). The disgusting or reviling is too much of the object that it purports to represent - recall Kant's language: 'the object is represented *as if it were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting*.' In other words, disgust is the expression of an ugliness that fails to represent, that cannot therefore be reinscribed into an aesthetic or - in a different sense of its failure to represent - political economy; it is a representation that, in Derrida's words, 'annuls itself,' that fails in relation to the representable, that 'forces one to consume, but without allowing any chance for idealization' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 22). Disgust comes too close - it forces itself down your throat and yet cannot be digested, only expelled

[3] Derrida's description of the 'parergonal overflow' of vomit extends his theorization in *The Truth in Painting* of Kant's exploration of supplementary *parerga*. There, Derrida argues that Kant's *parergon* 'inscribes something which comes as an extra, exterior to the proper field [. . .] but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking. It is lacking *in* something and it is lacking *from itself*' (Derrida [1978] 1987, 56).

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

forever, utterly - hence Derrida's memorable conclusion, 'the disgusting can only be vomited' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 23). This is the particular perversion of disgust: it provides excessive enjoyment (*à la jouissance*) and thus, in turn, it eats the conditions for the possibility of pleasure - in a formulation horrible for Kant if acceptable to a Nietzsche or a Bataille, disgust 'makes one desire to vomit' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 23).

In all this so far, we have remained with the mouth, the embouchure; in the French, *degoût* lets disgust rest lightly on lips, teeth, tip of the tongue - all that is involved in either hungrily taking in or appallingly refusing matters of *goût*. However, Derrida concludes 'Economimesis' with a provocative assertion that the logocentric system can accommodate, consume, and represent everything except vomit, which, nevertheless, is not the negative of the system. For what stands to the edge of the aesthetic is one single thing further, and in this move both Kant and Derrida lose the mouth, leave the tasting sense behind. Citing Kant's claim that the degraded senses smell and taste 'are both more subjective than objective' (Kant [1798] 2006, 49), and fail to lead to direct cognition without interventionary media (salts, liquid, air), Derrida notes that despite this similarity, smell suffers a harsher treatment from Kant than taste proper. The eighteenth-century philosopher sniffs in his *Anthropology*:

> *Smell* is taste at a distance, so to speak, and others are forced to share the pleasure of it [*mit zu geniessen*], whether they want to or not. And thus smell is contrary to freedom and less sociable than taste [. . .]. [T]aking something in through smell (in the lungs) is even more intimate than taking something in through the absorptive vessels of mouth or throat. (Kant [1798] 2006, 50)

Smell not only defies reason and compromises autonomy: Kant calls it 'ungrateful,' not worth cultivating. Kant's anxiety about and condemnation of the sense revolves around the unsociability of smell - which both fails to promote sociability, as does the superior taste with its meal-taking and whatnot, and also violates sociality by affirmatively imposing on the freedom of others. From this, Derrida concludes with the extraordinary formulation: 'There is worse than the literally disgusting. And if there is worse, it is because the literally disgusting is maintained, as security, in place of the worse' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 23). In other words, so long as disgust remains with the mouth, even its negativity is assimilable to logocentrism; past literal disgust (*degoût*) is that something more, that something even worse than the very worst of the strongest sensations.

My argument follows from the way in which disgust is figured by Derrida, reading Kant, not as a compendium of its possible provocations (dirt, the corpse, feces) - each of which might suggest that a relation to its

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

object and cause would be possible - but as the form of the possibility for something more disgusting than the literally disgusting. Because disgust falls outside of any economy, its debt cannot be secured: that which is '*l'exclu absolu*' does not designate a limit, nor the reaching of a transgression, even less the intention or object of that negative affect, but rather, it designates the place without placement - a place that cannot take place. This non-place is not an issue of taste (aesthetic or sensual), but an opening up of the possibility for 'something more disgusting than the disgusting, than what disgusts taste. The chemistry of smell exceeds the tautology taste/disgust' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 25). What is unnamable in logocentrism (what cannot pass through the mouth) and 'which in turn can only vomit it and vomit itself in it' is that which is completely unassimilable to speech; as Derrida says, the word '*vomit* arrests the vicariousness of disgust; it puts the thing in the mouth' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 25), in turn halting the risk of disgust, which is the ever about-to-arrive unassimilable that cannot be spoken. What disgust names, for Derrida, is the structure that overrides individual instantiations of the disgusting in the 'something more disgusting than the disgusting,' that which is 'worse than the literally disgusting.' It is in this formulation that I locate the possibility for a visual ethics that will be elaborated in relation to the second film by Lynch, *Wild at Heart*. My argument is that the form of disgust is a designation of the something *worse than the worst* - a structure organized around the opening of exclusion and not a content that fills it in, or gives it shape, coherence or substance.

This something-more is where Derrida ends his meditation on Kant's *Critique*, but it is precisely with the twin figures of unsociable smell and the designation of the *worse than the worst* - 'something more disgusting than the disgusting' - that I want to take up this argument and produce its logic elsewhere. This production will not be entirely faithful to Derrida's reading; rather, it considers whether one can approach disgust through a prescriptive approach towards that final formulation, what I want to call 'an ethics of the worse than the worst.' This formulation produces its own regurgitation of Lacan's order in his seventh Seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, that one should not give ground relative to one's desire. This citational maxim might be designated as - Do not give ground relative to your disgust. Do not give up on (the non-place designated by) your *Ekel*! Thus, the bad object of my argument is a film like Lukas Moodysson's *A Hole in My Heart* (*Ett hål i mitt hjärta*, 2004), in which, after all that can be done to bodies and all that can be done to disgust - the worms, the fucking, the violence, the gorging, the pissing - vomit appears as the climactic sign of having reached the limit, that transgression can go no further, that the film can end no other way than having Geko stick his finger down his throat, lean over inches from Tess's face and vomit into her mouth for her to take it in, to swallow, to consume.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

Such a film purports to cross the threshold, to transcend, to take a spectator to a limit case, to the realm of the excluded - and to do so via vomit explicitly; (many texts do this: consider the pornography produced by Extreme Associates).[4] A relation to disgust that *culminates* with vomit imagines it consumes the non-place designated by the worse than the worst. In other words, by figuring vomit as the ultimate, as the pure event as such, Moodysson's film purports to eat and become the 'something more disgusting than the disgusting,' instead of designating as uninhabitable the properly impossible position of the worse than the worst. Vomit here is not the worst precisely because it says: This is the worst.

Historically, film theory (in particular horror studies and work indebted to Kristeva's theory of abjection) have concretized disgust into specific and singular things, images, or icons (*that* corpse; *this* rot; *these* maggots); however, doing so involves what Derrida describes as making a down payment on something before true disgust, paying out a security in place of disgust as such. The 'worse than the worst' is a grammatical paradox, the suggestion that the superlative is surpassable a logical impossibility. But the force from that continual generative opening into a space that language does not allow, that regurgitation without pause, involves the continual negotiation with exclusion and irrecuperable negation that is the animated structure of disgust. Disgust is a beyond of any thing: the form of the possibility for the ever-worse. The move to identify and give substance to the excluded is an attempt at moving the exterior of thought to the interior of theory (or a theory, of disgust). To concretize the excluded - to point, stark deixis, and insist 'this is this' or 'this is it' - is to avoid having to think disgust by only ever thinking the disgusting.

The history of disgust is the history of its spatial metaphors. The mapping of disgust involves two distinctly different models: a three-dimensional plot of relative positions in space in disgust's affinity to notions of nearness or its threat of proximity (in the eighteenth-century aesthetician's argument that it fails to leave adequate room for contemplative distance); *and* a series of points on a line, beyond which one must not pass, the model of disgust whereby it derives from excess. These two spatial models cannot be mapped on the same set of axes, for the one involves a coming-too-close, while the other involves a going-too-far: figured onto a singular site, the pull-me-push-you tension might rip a body apart. The spatio-temporal paradoxes of disgust are fitting for a notion that is not substance but structure around

[4] Formally, this scene is treated as the film's finale; consider the *BFI* review of the film (Gilbey 2005): 'Geko vomits into Tess' willing mouth. Moodysson puts great skill into choreographing this degrading pantomime; he clearly regards it as the film's dramatic climax, not to mention a distillation of the social ills he has diagnosed.'

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

which forces bend, contract, and mobilize, like a black hole singularity measurable only by the intensity of its displacements. Theories that fix disgust in space and time lose not only the movements of disgust as a generative structure, but attempt to co-opt the certainty of positions in space at the expense of losing disgust's speed, velocity, and nauseous rush. Indeed, disgust's emesis compels a reversal of metaphorical energies; less the black hole vacuum of meaning that its zero-point function as the excluded of philosophy might suggest, disgust is far more like the hypothetical white hole, an emissive, productive horizon, ejecting matter in place of absorbing it. In place of a structure that can only suck things in, disgust continuously spits things out: you might say that disgust continually vomits that which it never consumed. If the black hole pathos is that it is that from which nothing can escape, the white hole ethos is that it is that which is impossible to reach. Because there is always a horizon beyond which the worse than the worst may be put into play, the worst is exceedable by the ever worse. It is therefore never fully arrived, and, thus, certainly, and ineluctably - the worst is always yet to come.

Given that I am treating disgust not as a container for specific objects but as a structure of opening up the worse than the worst, nowhere is that form more difficult (hence most necessary) to consider than in a film that teases us with the concreteness of various objects in close-up - a film that purports to make the image bear the burden of the disgusting but that, upon further examination, leaves open the gap for the possibilities of generating an ever worse as a formal structure. David Lynch's postmodern romp *Wild at Heart* (1990) is one of his films with the least critical favor (at worst: critics loathe it, it provokes intellectual disgust). In one sense, the film requires, and provides, no plot summary - for it is largely a film of instants, memorable spectacles (the man in the bar who barks like a dog; Nicolas Cage's Sailor Ripley singing Elvis songs), parodic quotations (largely of *The Wizard of Oz*), and signs of the Lynchean universe (it appears to be set in both the 1980s and the 1950s, violence erupts under seemingly polite social circumstances, etc.). At the same time, things do take place in the film - though, because it is a road movie, that taking place is always a displacement of sorts, a taking place in motion's trajectory. The film opens with Sailor fighting and killing a man who has been hired by the momma of his sweetie Lula Fortune (a writhing Laura Dern); violence is introduced asymmetrically as an effect always in excess of its cause. Though parentally forbidden, Lula waits for Sailor to get out of prison, takes up with him again, and runs off to the anti-Oz, a sleepy Texas town where trouble and strangeness persistently follow them, as do the various men Lula's mother has hired to kill Sailor and separate the lovers forever.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

It is in Texas that Laura Dern vomits, and, as though conforming to Derrida's insistence that one must think vomit, and not 'the act or process of vomiting,' the close-up of the vomit presents it distinctly *a posteriori*, in its material facticity as such, and well after it has come into being.[5] The vomit arrives, as all good strangers must, from out of nowhere. In the latter half of the film, Sailor and Lula bide their time in a motel room, fucking, loving, planning for futures that will inevitably be deferred. Without warning - without seeing its coming into being - a scene opens with a close-up of vomit on the grimy motel floor, although it is also possible to fail to identify the contents of the strange patterned stain at all, on first seeing it. The spot is large, wet, with indeterminate clumps, dark flies settling unevenly over the strange pale circle. When Sailor soon thereafter returns to the motel room, he sits for a moment or two before asking, 'What's that smell?', thus retroactively conferring an affective solidity to the anamorphotic spot. Lula, lying on a bed, confesses that she 'barfed' and then there is, again, another brief shot of the vomit, this time from further away. The visual relationship to the vomit in the film is comprised of just those two shots, together consuming mere seconds of screen time. Later, Lula will realize - signaled by a flashback to an abortion when she was younger, a different type of extimate expulsion - that the vomit must mean she is pregnant; later still, when the villainous Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) attempts to seduce Lula, he will make reference to the smell of the vomit that lingers. Vomit does not figure more prominently than this in *Wild at Heart*, and yet the film turns on it - the spill on the ground is the film's grounding catastrophe.

The *parergonal* vomit that arrives from without and yet centers and destabilizes the film's world repeats the ejecting physicality of Laura Dern's Lula, a shocking, vibrating twitch of a being. Her contorted poses; pinup citations; distended, tortuous, wringing torsions make of her a walking (mostly dancing), talking (barely) affect on which a body is merely propped. A single arm, inexplicably lifted to the back of her head as a permanent pose, distorts her body into a Figure. It could be said that there is no need to spend film time showing Lula vomiting, because her entire physicality in the film up to that point has been an ever-evicting self attempting to loosen the fragile bond between a body and an 'I.' (This fractured physicality is a structure that vomit constitutively puts into play; as Diderot words it in

[5] Nochimson's reading of the other scene involving vomit, in which Lula's mother hysterically retches, succumbs to the error of subjectifying vomit that Derrida decries; she writes, 'the involuntary process of vomiting creates a tension between the direct sensory presence of the bodies of Lula and Marietta and their contrived styles of glamour' (Nochimson 1997, 39). Nochimson's conflation of vomit with vomiting wrongly emphasizes issues of control (loss of, retention of, display of), epitomized in either the abandonment to involuntarism in vomiting or the abandonment to love figured in the film's ending.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

Élements de physiologie: 'It is never you who wishes to eat or to vomit, it is the stomach; for urinating, it is the bladder' ([1773-1774] 1975, 1:1308).) Dern's arm slithers up through her hair to strain her body in angles and stretches; she is all squirms and wriggles. It is as though the definitive mark of both the cinema of ultraviolence and the road movie - *Bonnie and Clyde*'s famous bullet-ridden ballet - had been elongated and spread out over the surface of Laura Dern's writhing skin. Heaving, shrieking, shivering, panting, twisting, torquing - Lula, despite her clacking red shoes, is *not* Dorothy yearning for Oz, but the tornado itself.

If violence is, on the one hand, a problem of vectors of energy radiating from the female body, it is also an interpersonal (and sexualized) structure epitomized by the rape of young Lula and Bobby Peru's attempted rape-seduction of older, pregnant Lula. The earlier rape is introduced through a conversation in which Lula appears to offer her one and only lie to Sailor: she asserts that her mother did not know anything about her rape at twelve by an old family friend. In a flashback, we see Marietta coming across a bloodied postcoital Lula and attacking the assailant. If the rape introduces the possibility of deception - and lies in Lynch's narratives are often associated with violence, as though violence's first disruption is to the possibility of verifiable speech - it also introduces something unspeakable by Lula to Sailor and in *Wild at Heart* more generally. The ontological status of the flashbacks, whether fantasized or historical, is indeterminate and indeterminable. What vomit structurally designates in *Wild at Heart* as the possibility of a something worse than the worst is the retroactive violence of the rape, an unspeakable act that enters the film without having to be spoken, figured without losing its simultaneous quality of being, in a fundamental sense, unfigurable.

The return to the rape is possible only because this non-place has been granted within the film's logic; the citation of the rape of young Lula - a figural vomiting of it up into the present-day narrative - occurs in the infamous scene with Bobby Peru. Willem Defoe's foul villain knocks on Lula's motel room door one day when Sailor is out working on their car. He asks to use her bathroom and then pisses with the door open, his back to an increasingly agitated Lula. Slinking out of the bathroom, Bobby Peru leers, 'You got the smell in this room of puke. You been puking, little girl? You sick? Pregnant?' In this scene, Defoe famously corners Dern, grabs her and says to her, over and over, 'Say, "Fuck me."' Until she does, at which point he jumps back, grinning his gap-blackened maw, wildly yee-haws 'Someday, honey, I will!' and leaves a mortified Lula in his wake. The humiliation of the forced speech is the force of assaultive exteriorization more broadly, figured as well in the unseen instance of vomiting. But in place of the vision of that moment is this violence of speech wrenched out of the body, and the

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

violence of this force is made possible by a parasensual dimension of the vomit: not its vision, but its smell. It is the smell of sick that lingers, permeates, mobilizes the violence of, and frames this scene (and this woman) - it is the condition for a non-visual apperception of the status of the (interior, fertile) body by Peru and the revelation of truth now available for blackmail. Readings of this scene, Slavoj Žižek's in particular (1997; 2001), reduce the dimension of exteriorization to a matter of the eroto-violent words spoken; but such a reading takes place under the logic of denial that Lula practices and that makes the violence against her possible: to critically refuse the lingering persistence of the smell of vomit that is the precondition for this very encounter.

Smell, recall, is Kant's account of the unsociable dimension of taste - it forces itself upon unwitting recruits to its sensory aspects. It is smell by which Derrida accounts for 'something more disgusting than the disgusting,' and it is, crucially, not the sight of but the smell of the vomit that cannot be erased in Lula and Sailor's hotel room - it is smell that introduces historicity and the archiving of time in the film. It is the threatening mobility of scents that grounds this scene in a materiality that is of, but also beyond, bodies, and that makes, in fact, the forced utterance of 'Fuck me' only a citation of the more unmediated force of the smell of the vomit that already moves between, around, and among bodies. This is not to psychologize the famous humiliation scene as a response to the olfactory trauma, but rather to suggest that vomit's labor is neither thematic nor iconic but structural: that what vomit mobilizes for representation is the more disgusting than the literally disgusting dimension of smell. For in the hierarchy of the cinematic senses, it is smell - and not blindness - that is vision's true other. The sensual prohibition at the heart of the cinematic medium - what is foreclosed absolutely from cinematic logics - is the lingering acidity that tears at the tissues of the nose. The materiality of this film cannot be all; designated as centering *Wild at Heart* - framing it and framing Lula - is something that necessarily, absolutely and irreducibly, is excluded from its sensual workings.[6] In other words, in Lynch's film, terrible, unthinkable violence is *smelled* instead of spoken, smelled because it *cannot* be spoken.

[6] Attempts have been made to reincorporate that excluded element in both cinematic exhibitions (e.g., John Waters' Odorama cards) and recent film theory. See, for example, the argument in Marks (2000) that sense perceptions, mediated through memory, can be somatically reproduced in a body, and that, therefore, cinema can appeal directly to smell, taste, and touch. A concern I have with this argument, however, is that Marks's interest in emphasizing the role of embodied experiences of smell-, taste-, and touch-memories in processes of spectatorial *understanding* seems to reassert the hegemony of meaning and knowledge, merely reascribing which senses top the new hierarchy of terms erected by Western philosophy with Plato.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

What vomit introduces in *Wild at Heart* is neither an appeal to an embodied spectator nor a trope nor a thematic subject or metaphorical expression; it puts into place, instead, the force of the olfactory as the formal agent that designates a structural rend at the center of the film, and that opens film form up to alterity. Smell introduces as a non-inhabitable space the something more disgusting than the disgusting, the beyond that taste as the literally disgusting holds as security in place of that something worse. The horizon of the worse than the worst that the vomit in *Wild at Heart* opens is a designation that cannot be filled in by the earlier rape, shown in indeterminate flashbacks, nor by the humiliating, violating seduction shown in the present, but that is the condition that makes the unspeakability, the exteriority of both to the film's narrative logic, possible in the first place. In place of the close-up of the vomit figuring as the "this is this" model of disgust as overpresent, violently imposed on a spectator, Laura Dern's vomit introduces something not given over to any perceiver but that forces the film's narrative to nevertheless tarry with its unsociable sensual force. In place of recuperating disgust for the visual by treating puke as something seen and not smelled, Lynch lets his vomit linger and reek; it orders bodies around, frames and hunts, reveals and accuses - it damns. *Wild at Heart* is the nightmare of the transcendental aesthetic, in which 'What is absolutely foreclosed is not vomit, but the possibility of a *vicariousness* of vomit' (Derrida [1975] 1981, 25; emphasis added). (Recall that vicarious means to be suffered by a substitute, an exchange of bodies, the sharability of horrors.) The film does not engage disgust in a metaphorical binary of the beautiful versus the ugly; rather, it commits to the overflow of vomit, its structural supplementarity, its position as the absolutely excluded. Vomit, then, is not a proxy for the other unfigurable violences in the film; rather, the mobilizing of a foreclosed and lingering smell opens up a position for those violences to enter the film without entering the speakable cinematic narrative or the seeable cinematic image. Violence becomes linked, not to events that happen to subjects, but to the film form itself, organized around a wandering, unsociable sense foreclosed within film's optocentrism.

The ethical promise in all this derives from Lynch's commitment to letting his vomit smell. *Wild at Heart* takes seriously the gesture of not cleaning up the vomit that has been left all over the floor; the lingering odors put in play an entire ethics of refusing to imagine one has transgressed with disgust - the fantasy that grounds *A Hole in My Heart*. Instead, the wild persistence of sick's smell extends in time as a form of the law by which further transgression is always and necessarily deferred - smells is what grounds the film in the certainty that *the worst is not yet*. The alternative to not cleaning up the vomit is to imagine that one can swallow it without having to expel it (one fantasizes, that is, that one can secure an economy

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

with and of disgust). Recall, the crucial insistence from Derrida: 'There is worse than the literally disgusting.' To give ground relative to one's disgust, then, is to give up on the possibility of engaging with the truly unspeakable except in violating, through speaking, except in being unfaithful to the event's very unspeakability. A fidelity to the ethics of the worse than the worst takes seriously the impossibility of disgust remaining with the mouth; it refuses the lie that imagines that vomit produces an encounter with the limit. Tarrying with a worse that is always yet to come - definitively not *there* where one can say it has arrived, and that will not be *there* when it has arrived because of its vicariousness - commits a text to the far less sure structure by which vomit opens up a deferred and uncertain limit. But, in this great textual uncertainty - and it is great; it is rare; consider how many films clean up their vomit - in this abandonment through retaining a non-occupied place of the 'something more disgusting than the disgusting,' is to be seen something very troubling to those who would insist that a camp or postmodern aesthetic has no room for an ethics. For a practice - textual, or let us say, any - of not giving up on one's *Ekel* designates the unassimilable without attempting to return it to the realm of the assimilable through what is always a form of violence.

Do not imagine that this is a metaphor.

Film-Philosophy | ISSN: 1466-4615

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